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ABSTRACT

Across the United States, there is a growing teacher shortage, and teacher education programs must balance demands for new teachers and demands for higher teacher quality. The need for increased numbers of beginning teachers in special education and rural school districts is noted. At Gonzaga University in rural eastern Washington, teacher educators sought to clarify the criteria guiding decisions about student admission into or dismissal from their teacher education program. A growing number of lawsuits against universities by students who were denied admission or dismissed from teacher education programs has highlighted the need to identify the professional and interpersonal skills that teachers need as well as ways to assess them adequately. Gonzaga invites teacher-education applicants to attend a Saturday morning professional skills lab. The lab introduces applicants to the professional and interpersonal skills and attitudes that a teacher needs and emphasizes the importance of reflective thinking in the profession. The lab also allows faculty to screen out applicants who show little potential for success. To date, 600 Gonzaga students have attended the lab, and not one student has been dropped from the program after being admitted. Gonzaga also developed a Fair Process Manual to explain student rights and responsibilities and the process for monitoring student progress in the program, and uses a "yellow lights" system in which faculty record anecdotally any incidents that cause them concern. (SV)

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ED 453 030

"BUT I HAVE A RIGHT TO BECOME A TEACHER!"

Introduction

Teacher educators have become increasingly aware of the growing shortage of beginning teachers who will be needed to replace the large number of current teachers who are reaching retirement age. This shortage is having an impact on teacher education programs and teacher educators are being asked to dramatically increase the number of teachers they can prepare each year. Teacher educators are also being asked, however, to maintain and/or increase the quality of the teachers they prepare and those candidates are being required to meet ever-increasing standards in order to be eligible for licensure. These dual forces, which are in some ways in conflict, are confronting teacher educators at a time when they are being faced more and more often with lawsuits from students they have dismissed from the programs or have not admitted in the first place.

In this paper, we will 1) discuss the growing teacher shortage, especially the trends that affect rural and small school districts and the impact this call for an increase in the number of beginning teachers is having on teacher educators, particularly as it relates to the issue of maintaining quality of their programs and the teachers they prepare; 2) share the processes one institution used to develop indicators of quality, both academic and attitudinal, of their preservice students; and 3) share the fair processes that institution developed in order to protect itself legally from the lawsuits filed by students who sued after being dismissed from the program because they not demonstrate the needed competencies.

The growing teacher shortage

There is a growing awareness of the predicted teacher shortage and the teacher education literature, as well as the popular press, have published an increasing number of studies which alert us to this shortage and the need to increase the supply of qualified beginning teachers (Arakawa, 1999; Associated Press, 1999; Dortch, 1994; Koretz, 1997). In Hawaii, for example, the Department of Education expects they will need about 400 new special education teachers in each of the next three years. "There are 21,000 special-needs students among the state's 187,395 students" (Arakawa, 1999). Over 50% of the current special education teaching positions are held by teachers who are not licensed in special education (working under emergency credential) and a new state law says they cannot be rehired. In addition to this, the state experiences an approximately 50% attrition rate in each two-year period (Arakawa, 1999). Another complicating factor is the decision in a recent federal class action suit (brought by Jennifer Felix) which called for the state to provide increased mental health services for disabled students by June 2000.

In Nevada, the Clark County School District (CCSD), a district that covers 7910 square miles and educates students in urban (metropolitan Las Vegas area), suburban and rural locations, they find the population has doubled in the last ten years and in 1998, the county had a population of approximately 1.25 million. It is now the eighth largest district in the United States. Official enrollment for the 1998-1999 school year was 203,777, constituting 60 per cent of all school children in Nevada. Significant changes in the county population have impacted public education in the district. The CCSD states that socio-economic indicators show that Clark County is above the state average in the number of minority residents (21.2%) and above the state average in the number of families living below the poverty level (11.1%). The CCSD employs over 13,000 licensed staff with more than 1500 teachers being hired each of the last 8 years.

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Indicators of quality

The decision to admit a student to a teacher preparation program is an important one: important to that individual's future and crucial to the children the individual would encounter in his/her career in teaching. Equally important are the decisions we make as professionals to dismiss a student from our program. As we move into an ever more litigious society, teacher educators must be aware of our rights and responsibilities regarding admissions and dismissal decisions. More and more of us are being faced with the threat of lawsuits from students to whom we have denied admission or have dismissed from our programs. We know that being successful in teaching involves more than achieving an adequate grade point average, that there are professional and interpersonal skills necessary for success in teaching, but we often have difficulty articulating just what those skills are. As we think about defending ourselves in court, we must be able to show clearly that we can identify what those skills are, that we can assess them adequately, and can judge when a student is deficient and shows too little aptitude for success in teaching.

The importance of these issues was underscored in 1997 when the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education's Executive Committee approved the formation of a new Special Study Group (SSG) devoted to Admission and Retention in Teacher Education. The SSG met for the first time at the 1998 Annual Meeting and described its work as the examination of issues related to admissions and retention of students in teacher preparation programs. Members will share existing admissions policies and procedures, discuss legal issues related to those policies, and discuss specific problems related to admission and retention.

As our institution faced four lawsuits several years ago, we found the need to go beyond the teacher education literature to learn how to better protect the institution from suits filed to protest our admissions and dismissal decisions, decisions we know are valid, judgments that need to be made. We studied the court rulings from other professional programs and then initiated the processes described below at our institution.

At Gonzaga University, we began with a model first developed at the University of Redlands and then revamped it to meet our particular needs. We wanted to find a way to screen out program applicants who showed little potential for success in our program and to get to know the skills and needs of our prospective students. We also wanted to introduce the key themes of our program so students would know from the beginning what our program emphasized and what we valued as professionals. In particular, we wanted to introduce the concept of reflective thinking, the idea that teaching is an interpersonal and professional act, the idea of the value of developing conflict resolution skills, and the philosophy we share in our belief in the value of multiple perspectives and ways of doing. We also wanted to introduce students to the importance of the development of their professional skills, including humor, self-knowledge, resiliency factors, collaboration, respect for the field of education, how to think on your feet, and how to collaborate. We based our model on the literature on reflective thinking (Posner's work was our true base), on the literature about adult learners, on the teacher induction literature, and on surveys done by the Washington State Professional Education Advisory Board about the skills needed by beginning teachers.

We decided to structure a Professional Skills Lab as a Saturday morning, four-hour session with a variety of activities. We would begin with a welcome and an introduction from the Associate Dean, introducing the faculty, and explaining the rationale for the Lab. We would then discuss advising, state regulations, and distribute some of the paperwork we're required to file. We wanted to teach a new skill in the Lab to make this a more meaningful learning experience and decided to investigate various instruments we might use during the Lab. We selected the True Colors materials (True Colors Communications Group, 1990) which are based on Jungian theory and are somewhat related to the Meyers-Briggs test. The True Colors materials help individuals (children and/or adults) identify four basic personality types; the materials include suggested classroom activities and videos.

We begin the morning with a review of the history and purpose of the Lab and then present the True Colors theory. We spend approximately 1.5 hours presenting the theory, having students self-analyze, having students work in small groups, and then doing a jigsaw activity back to the full group. Then we show a video we made in which we demonstrate the theory in practice in a simulation of our introductory course. We then divide students into small groups and assign each group a faculty member/facilitator; the groups discuss the theory and how they might apply the information while the facilitator records behavioral observations. We did change this process after the first time through because we found that the facilitators were so skillful that all students participated actively in the groups and we observed no problematic behaviors. We now run the groups in a leaderless format; the students

are given three situations they might encounter as teachers and are asked to come to consensus about what they would do if they were in that situation. The faculty member is a silent observer and record-keeper. Students then are called back to the large group and are given a reflective writing exercise.

The products we take away from the Lab are the state-required forms, the faculty observers' notes from the leaderless group discussion, and the reflective writing sample. The Department Chair then reviews all the materials, meets with students who were identified as potentially problematic, and files the materials in their departmental files.

The advantages we have found from this process are that faculty who teach courses later in the program have a chance to meet the new students, students have a chance to meet the faculty, and students learn a new theory and develop better interpersonal skills. We can identify and counsel out of the program the students who show insufficient potential for teaching at this point. We have a chance to screen the students before they request a site for their first In-School Experience and the students have a chance to bond together with other students who share a common goal. Students have told us in both their reflective writing exercises and comments made orally that the Lab was a really positive experience. They learn about themselves, how to better deal with others and about the professional skills they will need to develop. The disadvantages are that it means faculty are asked to work on yet another Saturday morning, it's hard to predict how many students will actually attend, we have to follow up on the students who did not attend, and it generates zero credit hours but incurs expenses in faculty time and physical resources.

To date, approximately 600 Gonzaga students have completed the process. Since we initiated this process, not one student has been dropped from the program after being admitted. We are convinced that in the cases of students we have not admitted that our collective judgments were justified. We believe that our teacher preparation program has been strengthened by more careful attention to the admissions process because we are able to use the insights gained during the assessment as diagnostic information to better meet individual student's needs. This process has enabled us to be much more clear with prospective students about the ideas and values embedded in our program, including our commitment to cross-cultural teaching, our belief in the necessity of effective interpersonal skills, and our commitment to diversity. We have also been able to recruit more students from under-represented groups because of our move to this more holistic admissions process.

While we were designing the Professional Skills Lab, we developed a Fair Process Manual to apprise students of their rights and responsibilities and to make them aware of the monitoring processes we would be using to assess their progress in the teacher education program. This document was drafted by the various directors of programs within the School of Education and then was rewritten to correct for style. The document was then sent to our Academic Vice President and to the university's corporate counsel for extensive reviews. We made needed changes and then published the document; it has been revised since our administrative restructuring to reflect current job titles and processes. The Fair Process Manual is distributed to all incoming students each semester. We also developed a receipt form which students sign to acknowledge that they received the Manual and promise to read it; students receive a copy of that form and the original is filed in their certification file.

The Fair Process Manual refers to the importance of the development of interpersonal, social, and behavioral competencies deemed essential for the profession. We needed to be specific about what those competencies were so that we could communicate them clearly to our incoming students. We gathered the faculty together and brainstormed the essential behaviors we needed to observe in our students and designed a list we call "Professional Standards for Teacher Education Students." This list is divided into five categories: responsibility, integrity, attitude, respect, and service and describes the expectations (everything from appropriate attire to being punctual to volunteering time to the community) we have; the list also reiterates our division's mission statement. We distribute it at our Professional Skills Lab and discuss it each semester in our classes when we review the syllabus for our course.

We also use a system we call "Yellow Lights" in which our faculty record anecdotally any incidents which cause them concern. These are sent to the program director so she can track our students' progress and meet with them to discuss the concerns. We also work with our Student Disabilities Services center regarding students who have self-disclosed their disabilities; faculty are notified each semester of any students needing accommodations in order to be successful. This process is handled in a confidential manner in order to protect students' rights.

Legal processes

We are beginning to see a number of teacher educators (Lemke, 2000; Lemke and Harrison, 2000) who are writing about the legal implications of their admissions and dismissal decisions and a growing discussion of the ways colleges can protect themselves legally from the inevitable lawsuit from someone who was dismissed but insists that everyone has a right to become a teacher.

Many teacher educators have been faced with the threat of lawsuits from students who were either not admitted or who were dismissed at some point in the teacher preparation program. Many of us have been sued and have had the experience of being told by the judge that our procedures were insufficient in terms of explaining our policies, the definition of professional judgment and how the role plays in a decision to dismiss a student. This insufficiency resulted in the upholding of the student's case and the university was forced to readmit the student or even pay damages to the student. However, we find that in many cases, the same situation is not true in other professions. There have been suits filed against schools of medicine, dentistry, pharmacy, and nursing, which dismissed students (often for lack of development of appropriate "professional skills", and the courts upheld the decision to dismiss. Teacher educators can learn from these experiences by studying the relevant court and identifying ways these other professionals have found to protect themselves and justify the professional judgments they have exercised.

Decisions to deny admission or to dismiss a student from a professional program are never easy. The issue of faculty members' reluctance to make these kinds of decisions exists in every professional program. There may be particular concern on the part of our tenure-track and clinical faculty (e.g. student teaching supervisors) because of their perception about the extent to which the institution will back them. However, the courts have treated decisions made by faculty in all categories equally and have supported academicians' decisions as long as students' rights were observed and the decisions were made fairly. In *Connelly v. University of Vermont* (1965), the federal district court ruled that it is within the purview of academic freedom for faculty to make decisions about students' progress. Faculty and administrators were described as being uniquely qualified to make these judgments.

When faculty use quantifiable assessment strategies it is fairly easy to show how a student is progressing. It is less clear, and so less comfortable for many faculty, to discuss a student's performance when more subjective assessment methods are used. In teacher education, as in other professional programs which include clinical experiences, it is necessary and appropriate for faculty to make subjective judgments about a student's progress. Fassett and Olswang (1991) found that "recent court decisions have upheld faculty professional judgments when minimal due process was provided" (p. 211). They went on to point out that "when students' rights are observed, and a fair evaluation of the student's progress indicates a basis for dismissal, faculty members at all levels can be reasonably confident that they will prevail in a legal challenge" (p. 214).

Conclusion

The development of our Professional Skills Lab, Fair Process Manual, and Yellow Lights system, and the more consistent implementation of our policies and procedures has led to four years with no lawsuits filed against us. We need to prepare the most effective teachers we can in order to meet the needs of today's students. We must protect our institutions and we ought to feel confident about the defensibility of our professional judgments so that we can continue to prepare future teachers of the highest quality. We can do this if we study the experiences of our colleagues in other professional programs and learn to develop and then apply consistently our policies and procedures.

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